

Ceramic Displays, African Voices: Introduction

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Abstract

African ceramics in museums have historically been displayed in a manner that employs coded 'norms' borrowed from exhibition practices of western anthropological or historical modes: 'ethnic', geographic, gendered. To confront these over-generalizations Dr. Elizabeth Perrill and Wendy Gers assembled a group of scholars to present in the panel, 'African Ceramics on Display: Beyond Didactics and Demonstrations,' at the 16th Triennial Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) Symposium, 2014. Introductory comments were presented by Wendy Gers followed by formal papers given by Moira Vincentelli, Esther Esmyol, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Kim Bagley; a discussant presentation was delivered by Robert T. Soppelsa, Senior Curator of Art in Embassies for the U.S. State Department and discussion was moderated by Elizabeth Perrill. The United Kingdom, South Africa, Nigeria, and the United States all had voices at the table. The panel's motivations and theoretical underpinnings and the group's efforts to foreground non-hegemonic voices in the world of African ceramic display are here in presented.

Key words

Ceramics, Africa, museum, display, New Museology, Post-Colonial, pottery, sculpture

Preamble

This group of articles is intended to be the beginning of a provocative dialogue, an entry point to engage with ceramics curators, artists, aficionados, collectors, and museologists. As professional colleagues and scholars specializing in the field of Southern African ceramics we, Dr. Elizabeth Perrill and Wendy Gers, maintain a passion for developing rich and sophisticated conceptions of the diversity of African ceramics, both historical and contemporary. Over the years we have informally shared our observations on exhibitions of African ceramics with one another, as well as with academic colleagues, museum professionals, gallery owners, and practicing artists. We have both observed biases in collecting and display practices of African ceramics, in both public and private spheres. In particular, the representation of modernist and contemporary ceramics that are our passions has been sidelined. The contextually detached and didactic exhibitions in which 'ethnic' or social typologies, geographical studies, chronological narratives and visual affinities have been the primary thematic devices employed within the curatorial lexicon seemed to leave something out, silencing the contemporary and historical diversity of African ceramic production.

Rather than produce a critical list of lamentations, we decided to proactively engage with this subject by jointly proposing a panel on best practices for the Display of African Ceramics to the 16th Triennial Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) Symposium. Our aim was to engage with the broadest possible variety of ceramics, to include research on historical, modern, and contemporary objects. We also aimed to defy the tedious boundaries between rural and urban artists, commercial potters and contemporary practitioners who embrace conceptual approaches, sculptural ceramists and those working in rich traditions of vessel making. In our call for papers we invited perspectives that critically reflected on innovative means of displaying African ceramics.

Our ACASA panel, ‘African Ceramics on Display: Beyond Didactics and Demonstrations,’ was accepted, all the international presenters received travel grants, and five presentations were delivered in the Brooklyn Museum of Art on March 15, 2014. The panel involved introductory comments by Wendy Gers; formal papers by Moira Vincentelli, Esther Esmyol, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Kim Bagley; a discussant presentation by Robert T. Soppelsa, Senior Curator of Art in Embassies for the U.S. State Department and a moderated discussion by Elizabeth Perrill. In the end, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Nigeria, and the United States all had voices at the table. A lively debate concluded the panel, which highlighted the schisms that often exist in the ceramics world.

The ACASA event convinced us that the subject of African exhibition best practices within the ceramics domain required further attention from a wider audience and the papers merited publication. What follows is a series of revised, edited and peer-reviewed articles by four of the original presenters, Moira Vincentelli (Aberystwyth University), Esther Esmyol (Iziko Museums of South Africa), Ozioma Onuzulike (University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria) and Kim Bagley (independent artist, South Africa / England). Robert Soppelsa’s role as discussant provided a glimpse into the world of diplomatic patronage and exhibitions in various American embassies in Africa, that he has coordinated in his professional capacity of Senior Curator of the Art in Embassies program, a topic that certainly warrants further research and writing.

This special issue reflects upon and develops critiques of display practices and exhibition design from four truly diverse perspectives: a Scottish curator living and working in Wales, a South African curator, a Nigerian scholar/ceramist and a South African artist who has been awarded the first PhD in ceramics practice from the University for Creative Arts, U.K. We will not go into a summary of each article here, as abstracts and eloquent discussions have been provided by each of these eminent figures in the field. We do want to point out to readers that Moira Vincentelli’s focus, “African Pottery, Studio Pottery, and Contemporary Ceramics on Display: Sankofa, Ceramic Tales from Africa,” has been featured in *Interpreting Ceramics* Issue 10. We hope that Vincentelli’s reflection on her contribution, as well as the three African voices included here on the histories and practices of displaying African ceramics will provide an engaging way forward and intellectual spaces in which museum professionals, scholars, and practitioners might imagine new scenographic, contextual, or textual inclusions of African ceramic works that move beyond the norms summarized below.

African Ceramics on Display: Best Practices – Moving Beyond Didactics and Demonstrations

African ceramics, when accorded with what some would describe as the ‘privilege’ of being part of a permanent exhibition in western and African museums, have historically been displayed in a manner that employs coded ‘norms’ borrowed from exhibition practices of western anthropological or historical museums. Before entering museum collections, many of these objects were filtered through the lens of private collections. Their entry into a heritage institution ‘transformed’ them into secular, public objects. Within the greater evolution of museums, from the 1980s, these objects became vehicles for transmitting specific ‘theses’: the ‘ethnic’, gendered, or geographic identities that were often the major zones highlighted in didactic information. While in recent years many museums have implemented new mediation strategies and invited both artists and the public to dialogue with specific objects, examples of these practices are extremely rare within the African ceramics domain. Generally, the narratives listed above, visual affinities, or groupings by medium remain the primary

thematic devices employed within the curatorial lexicon of displays of African ceramics. This generally results in a contextually detached and stale didactic exhibition experience; an impenetrable anthropological tone often robs viewers of the chance to see African ceramic production as historically transforming, socially vital, or part of contemporary art worlds.

In this introduction we reflect on some possible ‘best practices’ to enrich this special issue. These observations are the result of an inter-disciplinary engagement with issues raised firstly by post-colonial theory and secondly new museology. The latter will involve an overview of some prominent scholarly developments, legal precursors, artistic interventions with display, and recent Francophone theoretical texts concerning ‘expologie’ⁱ and ‘scenography’.

Post-Colonial Theory,ⁱⁱ the Museum, and New Museology – a shift beyond the anthropological

Within humanities, the past few decades have witnessed the impact of the 1960’s hermeneutic shift in anthropology and its museography, often referred to as “new museology.” This approach is evident in work by Anglophone scholars such as George E. Marcus, James Clifford, Nicholas Thomas, Ivan Karp, Ruth Phillips, Annie Coombes, Robin Boast, Sally Price, Laura Peers and Alison K Brown, and Francophone scholars Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Marc-Olivier Gonseth, Jacques Hainard, and Roland Kaehr, among others. These scholars have investigated changes within ethnographic and other museum collections and display policies, in respect to research concerning the objects themselves, discussions with source communities, or more general reflections on the articulation of the post-colonial condition in museums. The controversial scenography of the Musée Quai Branly (which opened in 2006) raised numerous urgent questions surrounding institutional practices. These areas of critique include the neo-colonial status of western anthropological collections and absorption of objects that were formerly categorized as anthropological into broader institutions, as well as formal conceptions of permanent display. The Musée Quai Branly’s often mysterious sound-track, alongside eery, spectacular lighting, problematic labelling and confusing curatorial zoning practices, were just a few topics that sparked intense debate (Price 2007).

While there has been much academic discussion, many of the most fundamental challenges posed by post-colonialism for the western museum, remain unresolved. These include who gets to ‘speak’ for and display ‘the other’. In the United States, the 1989 establishment and 1990 implementation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) began a legal means to begin addressing the rights of indigenous peoples to control their own sacred objects and remains. NAGPRA also began a debate within the U.S. national art world surrounding the voices of Native Americans within their own representation, a debate that is by no means resolved. The National Museum of the American Indian, legislatively brought into being in the same year as NAGPRA, continually seeks to educate the public and professionals alike on native self-representation (Lonetree and Cobb 2008). Recently, the European Project Ethnography Museums & World Cultures RIME (Réseau International de Musées d’Ethnographie) (2007-2013) financed by the Culture Program of the European Union, developed a significant body of research on rethinking the role of European Ethnography Museums in an increasingly global and multicultural world, dealing with urgent and complex issues such as the ‘original sin’ of most ethnographic museums, which were established in the context of colonization, the postcolonial challenge, and the role that native communities have had in the development of collaborative museography.ⁱⁱⁱ There are parallel examples in South Africa, Taiwan, Australia and around

the world of nations and regional authorities struggling with histories of display (Barringer and Flynn 1998; Berzock and Clarke 2011; Karp et al. 2006).

In parallel, the past decades have witnessed a growing number of renowned international artists, such as the Chapman brothers, Jane Alexander, Adriana Varejão, Yinka Shonibare, William Kentridge, Mona Houtoum, Robyn Orlin, Romuald Hazoumé, Steven Cohen, Chris Ofili, Kukuli Velarde, Samuel Fosso, Mohamed Bourouissa, Willie Bester, Bearnie Searle, El Anatsui, Tracey Rose and Barthélémy Toguo among others, who have produced significant bodies of work that are politically charged and informed by their experience or understanding of post-colonial theory, in both subtle and overt layers. They are supported by a significant growth in the global markets for contemporary art by non-western artists.

In tandem with this profusion of non-hegemonic voices, the museum has become one of the most esteemed media sites for contemporary artists (Putman 2001). Fred Wilson and other interventionist artists have destabilized aspects of western hegemony in the museum space, and this practice of raising difficult questions about historical omissions and biases, inclusions and exclusions within museum collection and displays are gaining international currency. Wilson, U.S. representative at the 50th Venice Biennale (2003) deconstructs the traditional display of art and artefacts in museums regarding their racial content and cultural assumptions. Using various scenographic devices, such as new wall labels, sounds, lighting, and non-traditional pairings of objects, the artist leads the viewer to recognize that changes in context create changes in meaning. Wilson's evocative juxtapositioning of evocative objects and (post-colonial) formulations of hybridity, syncretization, and pastiche, force the viewer to question the biases and limitations of cultural institutions and how they have shaped the interpretation of historical truth, artistic value and the language of display, 'expographie' or museum scenography.

Over the past three decades, the Musée d'Ethnographie in Neuchatel, Switzerland (MEN), has been a pioneering force in developing both rigorous theoretical analyses of museum scenography and in the practice of creating original forms of presentation in their exhibitions that seek to rupture the established canons of display. Noting that objects don't exist in isolation, but are mediated and reconstructed by their surrounds and internal technical devices, such as lighting, texts, images, models, voice, colour, architecture etc, the current Director of MEN, Marc-Olivier Gonseth explains that 'Scenography facilitates the transformation of the materiality to that of a discourse, via the creation of the 'hyperobject, that equally reflects text & image, and creates a space that may be traversed both literally (by the body) and by the imaginary (the mind)' (Gonseth 2000:163. Own trans., WG). The exhibition program at MEN aims to question the problematic interrelations and creative antinomies between ethnography and 'expographie'.^{iv} An exhibition in fact, is neither a text on the wall, nor images on a stage, or objects in showcases, but must offer the cognitive, physical, associative and emotional discovery of a problematic space. This understanding of the dynamic intellectual, ideological, formal and plastic components, engages with postcolonial concerns regarding both content and language.

Our summary here of some key moments in the development of alternative approaches to the display of objects is particularly important to the medium of ceramics. The silence of ceramic artists' voices surrounding the display, description, and inclusion of the ceramic medium in anthropological and art historical museums still predominates. Acknowledging the rich life-histories of ceramists from African or African diasporas and writing histories of the multifaceted backgrounds of artists such as Ladi Kwali (Nigeria), Magdalene Odundo (U.K.

based, born in Kenya), Kwabena Ampofo-Anti (U.S. based, born in Ghana), Helga Gamboa (U.K. based, born in Angola), Clive Sithole (South Africa), Simone Leigh (USA), Khaled Ben Slimane (Tunisia), Andile Dyalvane (South Africa), Ian Garrett (South Africa), Zeinab Salem (Egypt) or Ibrahim Said (U.S. based, born in Egypt) may fracture calcified geographic, gender or ethnic categorizations. Simultaneously, exhibitions that acknowledge ceramic production in Africa as part of broader art flows can dissolve the boundaries that have separated ceramics from other media. The perspectives conveyed by the articles included in this issue of *Interpreting Ceramics*, each written by an African voice, shed light on some exhibitions, histories of display, and contemporary practices that are expanding the field of African ceramics. The collection aims to broaden the terms of understand what practices and forms may constitute modern and contemporary African ceramics, and the associated histories of display and dissemination techniques.

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ⁱ The science of display within museums.

ⁱⁱ The term 'postcolonial' is used to signify a position against imperialism and Eurocentrism. Postcolonial Studies allows for wide-ranging investigations into power relations in various contexts. The formation of empire, the impact of colonization on postcolonial history, economy, science, and culture, the cultural productions of colonized societies, feminism and postcolonialism, agency for marginalized people, and the state of the postcolony in contemporary economic and cultural contexts are some broad topics in the field.

ⁱⁱⁱ See more at: www.riminet.eu and www.mela-blog.net/archives/1783#sthash.e3HtD8zF.dpuf

^{iv} The term 'expographie' generally refers to the seamless application of new technologies in a museum or in an exhibition. If museography concerns the discourse of objects, then 'expographie' may be considered to be the integration and assembly of various medias including films, multi-media, graphic panels, sound etc. (Translation by Wendy Gers http://www.metapraxis.fr/recherche_glossaire.html Consulted, 21 Nov 2014).